United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/41

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by International Council of Women and International Federation of Business and Professional Women, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

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Statement

The organizations members of Project Five-O: The International Federation of Business and Professional Women (known worldwide as Business and Professional Women International) and the International Council of Women hold consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and fully support the empowerment of rural women. Without empowerment and equality, the role of rural women cannot be fully realized in overcoming the challenges of everyday life and enjoying rights which are fundamental to good physical and mental health and general well-being and not being doomed to a life of poverty. These include the rights to:

(a) Ownership of property, including land;

(b) Ready access to clean, fresh drinking water for domestic use and good-quality water for crops;

(c) Appropriate housing away from soil and air pollution;

(d) Education and training;

(e) Sound financial advice and credit;

(f) Live in peace free from all forms of discrimination and violence.

Governments and institutions everywhere should work to ensure that rural women enjoy these rights and are part of the decision-making that affects their livelihoods. They need — in fact, they have the right — to sit on Boards where policy is developed and implementation overseen in, e.g., agriculture, aquaculture, forestry and the marketing of produce. Rural women play a large part in the food chain and in ensuring food security.

Rural women also face other challenges beyond their control, such as climate change, which affects crops and animal husbandry; diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria; natural disasters; civil strife; and the current global financial uncertainty, all of which ultimately affect food security. Women suffer more than men from the effects of these challenges and are more likely than they to live in poverty.

Sustainable development projects, such as those carried out by Project Five-O and smaller ones run by the International Council of Women, assist in ensuring that the valuable contribution that women make not only to their communities, but to society as a whole, are recognized. For many, such projects lead to the setting-up of business enterprises based on food production or traditional crafts.

Working through its affiliated councils and representatives at the United Nations in helping rural women to overcome the challenges that they face, the Council is mindful of the various relevant United Nations conventions, declarations and action plans, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Agenda 21, United Nations Environment Programme declarations, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals. The Council urges Governments not only to sign these instruments, but also to ensure that they are acted upon and become part of Government policy, with particular reference to reporting obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Council also notes the International Fund for Agricultural Development publication *Rural Poverty Report 2011*.

The challenges and needs of rural women are not dissimilar to those of urban women. The Council and Business and Professional Women International work tirelessly to improve the status and general well-being of all women and girls, particularly the marginalized, many of whom come from rural areas. The Council has conducted workshops and seminars focusing on climate change, the environment and food security, with the eradication of poverty as an underlying theme. One such seminar, held by the Asia Pacific Regional Council as recently as November 2011, focused on sustainable development, looking at women in the areas of agriculture, food security and health.

Rural women and the economy

Women play an important role in driving agriculture-led growth worldwide. Agriculture is a powerful engine for development, and, in several Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies, women constitute nearly half of the agricultural labour force. Women in developed and developing countries all carry disproportionate domestic responsibilities, but where attitudes towards women are more traditional — in particular in the rural areas of the least developed countries — the inequality of the work burden is at its highest, in terms of both domestic and agricultural workforce labour.

At the APEC summit on women and the economy, held in San Francisco, the Secretary of State of the United States of America, Hillary Rodham Clinton, stated: "Women farmers are up to 30 per cent less productive than male farmers, and that's not because they are working less or are less committed. It's because women farmers have access to fewer resources. They have less fertilizer, fewer tools, poorer-quality seeds and less access to training or to land. And they have much less time to farm because they also have to do most of the household work. When that resource gap is closed and resources are allocated equally — and, better yet, efficiently — women and men are equally productive in agriculture. And that has positive benefits. In Nepal, for example, where mothers have greater ownership of land because of their inheritance rights, there are fewer severely underweight children."

In developing economies, women's contributions could be much greater if they had equal access to essential economic resources and services, such as land, credit and training. Of particular importance is the legal enshrinement of these rights, it having been noted that women own less than 2 per cent of the world's private land and that, when their enterprises become successful, they are prone to being taken over by men. Business and Professional Women International is of the view that without legislation-based access to and protection of resources, economic improvement cannot be sustained.

In European Union countries, the number of people who are working either full-time or part-time in agriculture was 13.7 million in 2000; 12.2 million of them are the family workforce, and 38 per cent of them are women. Women working for companies in the agricultural sector make up the highest percentage in Italy, at 34 per cent. In Spain and Greece, this figure is 13 per cent, and in Portugal and France it is 9 per cent. In Asia and Africa, studies have shown that women work as many as 13 hours more per week than men. A study conducted in Africa found that on average, over the course of a year, women carried more than 80 tons of fuel, water and farm produce for a distance of 1 kilometre; men carried only one eighth

as much, or an average of 10 tons, for 1 kilometre. All this is evidence of the need to recognize the centrality of women to food security worldwide, and the need to unleash their economic potential.

Access to resources

Project Five-O, through its advocacy for the joint initiative of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Global Compact entitled "Women's empowerment principles: equality means business", supports the central role played by the initiative in opening up opportunities for women in the supply chain and the value chain.

The inaugural meeting of the International Trade Centre's Global Platform for Action on Sourcing from Women Vendors, held in Chongqing, China, was aimed at increasing the share of corporate, Government and institutional procurement secured by women vendors for the ultimate purpose of bringing greater economic benefit to women and their communities. As a result of bringing down the barriers for women in smaller or less-developed enterprises, they are able to reach the point of gaining access to larger supply contracts. Already, the platform has seen significant benefits for women in agriculture.

Project Five-O advocates training opportunities that can fit women vendors and women in the value chain across the enterprise development continuum. Despite progress made in national and international policies since the holding of the United Nations World Conference on Women in 1975, urgent action is necessary to ensure gender and social equity in agricultural knowledge, science and technology policies and practices. Such action includes strengthening the capacity of public institutions and non-governmental organizations to improve their knowledge of women's changing forms of involvement in farming and other economic activities. It requires placing priority on women's access to education, information, science and technology, and extension services to allow for the improvement of women's access, ownership and control of economic and natural resources. To ensure such access, ownership and control legal measures, appropriate credit schemes, support for women's income-generating activities and the reinforcement of women's organizations and networks are needed.

Closing the gender gap

The evidence set out above is supported by the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report*, which finds a direct correlation between the gender gap and economic productivity: the lower the gender gap, the higher the productivity. As Klaus Schwab, Executive Chair of the Forum, concludes, "Women and girls must be treated equally if a country is to grow and prosper". Discriminatory attitudes towards women, more strongly held in traditional rural communities, hamper economic and social development. There is now an urgent need to remove discriminatory attitudes that continue to inhibit women's participation in the economy. Only once that has been accomplished will we see the opportunity to accelerate growth in developing economies while, at the same time, producing more and cheaper food for our planet. Harnessing the economic potential of women will bring about a new and better future.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, if the resource gap that is clearly holding women back in developing economies were

closed, we could feed 150 million more people worldwide every year, and that is in addition to the higher incomes for families, the more efficient markets and the more agricultural trade that would result. In order to realize their potential as workers, entrepreneurs and business leaders, women need enabling environments to elevate the economic performance of communities, nations and the world.